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Citation for published version (APA):

Adams, R. (2010). RIP Malcolm McLaren: Creative Industries Pioneer. *London Journal of Tourism, Sport and Creative Industries*, 43-46.

Citing this paper

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RIP Malcolm McLaren: Creative Industries Pioneer

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Please cite as 'RIP Malcolm McLaren: Creative Industries Pioneer', in London Journal of Tourism, Sport and Creative Industries, No. 5, November 2010, pp. 43-46

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RIP Malcolm McLaren – Creative Industries Pioneer

In the spring of 2010, Malcolm McLaren died of cancer, aged only 64. He was best known, of course, as the Svengali-like figure behind the most notorious and controversial of all rock bands, the Sex Pistols, and the self-styled inventor of British punk (although many would dispute this claim.) While not an astute businessman in the conventional sense, he was certainly an extraordinary entrepreneur, with an almost unbeatable knack for sniffing out and capitalising on cultural trends. He was a dilettante, with fingers in many a cultural pie, and although he would not necessarily have expressed it in such terms, he was an activator for all kinds of cultural enterprise, exploring a range of creative industries. He was instrumental in reaffirming London's place at the heart of 'Cool Britannia', and thus – perhaps inadvertently – creating an environment in which the rhetoric and policy promoted by New Labour could flourish.

Born in 1946 to a Scottish engineer father and a middle-class Jewish mother, his parents split up while he was still in infancy. He was brought up his doting but unconventional maternal grandmother who encouraged bad behaviour and fostered in him a vehement anti-establishmentarianism. She remained the dominant influence in his life until he met fashion designer Vivienne Westwood in the mid 1960s.

For most of the 1960s McLaren led a Bohemian life, enjoying the nightlife of the Soho underground, and attending drama and art schools. These were places where an outsider might fit in, and McLaren found an outlet for his fervid creative urges, and fuel for his intellectual curiosity. He engaged enthusiastically with avant-garde ideas and techniques, staging pop art installations on Carnaby Street and Clapham Common. In 1967, while studying at Croydon Art School, he met Jamie Reid, who would provide the iconic graphic images of the Sex Pistols and early punk. They found inspiration in the Situationist philosophies of Guy Debord, which were then

stimulating student insurrections and civil disobedience throughout Europe - a youthful revolution that aimed to explode pop culture from within. Chaos and Anarchy were the watchwords of the time, and would prove to be very influential on McLaren's career. The Situationist International gave McLaren a taste for using popular media as a vehicle for creating cultural and social disorder, which combined a prankish humour with serious political intent.

After dropping out of yet another unfinished art degree in 1971, McLaren drifted in to his first proper business venture, running a shop on the King's Road in London with Vivienne Westwood. 'Let It Rock' sold fifties clothes to Teddy Boys, then enjoying something of a revival, in stark contrast and in opposition to the dominant hippie culture of the time. Despite his involvement in the counter culture, McLaren had no time for hippies, a subculture which seemed to him a feeble, middle-class imitation of everything that youthful revolt should be, with none of the sharp dressed menace of the Teds. Ultimately disappointed by the rigid conservatism of Teddy Boy culture, however, the shop began to diversify into 'deviant' clothing in a broader sense, stocking biker leathers, tight studded t-shirts, colourful zoot suits and more of Westwood's own designs.

The shop changed its name to 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die', and in 1973 was invited to exhibit at a boutique trade show in New York. Although he failed to make a single sale, it nonetheless proved an important trip for McLaren as he met, and briefly managed, the New York Dolls. This was a band who punctured the pompousness of the then dominant 'progressive' rock with their exuberant, noisy amateurism. The Dolls wore make-up and women's clothing, lived the rock and roll mantra of sex and drugs to excess, and were wildly, indiscriminately anti-establishment, puking at press conferences and wearing swastikas. McLaren was electrified, and again began see a new future for pop, which was translated into another make over of the King's Road Shop. Out went rock'n'roll and retro, in came black leather, rubber and 'specialist' clothing, 'all the sexual clothes that people normally sold as a fetish but which we would sell as street clothing, on the boutique strip.' (in Savage, 2001: 66)

The shop, now renamed 'Sex' also sold t-shirts with printed slogans designed by Westwood and attracted a motley clientele of suburban perverts and disaffected youth, including the teenagers shortly to be refashioned into the most notorious pop group in history. Putting the band together gave McLaren the opportunity to both advertise his shop and fulfil his fantasy of becoming like his hero Larry Parnes, the 1950s pop impresario who had masterminded the careers of Billy Fury and Tommy Steele amongst others.

The history of the Sex Pistols, their rapid rise to fame and notoriety and their equally rapid descent into chaos, acrimony and finally tragedy when bass player Sid Vicious died of a heroin overdose in early 1979, only months after he had been accused of the murder of his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, has been extensively documented, and is still hotly disputed.

McLaren's version of events underpins Julien Temple's 1980 film, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. He presents himself as a visionary, the man with the plan to take on the pop music establishment and industry and win; the rock 'n' roll Robin Hood who could divine 'cash from chaos' and change the face of British culture. Other reports, however, suggest that the Sex Pistols' stylistic innovations and their capacity to generate previously unseen levels of moral panic were actually the work of many talented and daring individuals – not least amongst them Westwood and lead singer Johnny Rotten, otherwise known as John Lydon – and often the result of more luck (and hyperbolic tabloid reporting) than judgement. An eight-year legal dispute between McLaren and Lydon over who owned the intellectual property rights and earnings of the Sex Pistols was finally settled in favour of the latter, although most of the money so famously extorted from the big record companies had been frittered away by McLaren's in the pursuit of his film making ambitions.

After the Pistols, McLaren briefly managed the bands Adam and the Ants and Bow Wow Wow, the latter formed of erstwhile members of the former and fronted by the 14 year old singer Annabella Lu Win. Like the Sex Pistols, this band was formed in part to provide mannequins to model Vivienne Westwood's clothes, this time her latest line in pirate fashion. McLaren again courted controversy by getting Lu Win to pose naked in a pastiche of Manet's painting *Dejeuner sur L'Herbe*, which featured on the cover of their biggest hit 'Go Wild in the Country', and claimed that he planned

to feature her in a paedophile magazine called *Chicken* he was publishing. Bow Wow Wow also briefly featured a second lead singer called Lieutenant Lush, later to find global fame under the name of Boy George with his own band, Culture Club. Frustrated by the limitations of creative control inherent in band management, McLaren reinvented himself as a pop star. Collaborating with New York DJs The World's Famous Supreme Team, his 1983 album *Duck Rock* was a collage of Hip Hop rapping and scratching, square dance calling, African drumming and Peruvian Indian folk. Although some may have criticized this as an exercise in postmodern cultural imperialism, Jon Savage claims that the central idea of the project was 'that by presenting music from around the world in a fresh context, you can stimulate interest in travel and tourism, and thus the exchange of information.' (1997: 150) The record certainly succeeded in broadening the musical horizons of its listeners, and making new sounds and sensibilities viable in British pop music.

McLaren stimulated an interest in travel and tourism in a more literal sense when British Airways used his rearrangement, with the composer Yanni, of The Flower Duet from the French opera *Lakme*, by Leo Delibes, in their global advertising campaign 'The World's favourite Airline'. Here he was building on the success of creating pop from another unlikely musical form, in 1984 he had scored a top 20 hit with 'Madame Butterfly', an electronic dance music remix of Puccini.

In 1991 he ventured into film making again, producing *The Ghosts of Oxford Street* for Channel 4, which charted the musical history of one of London's most famous thoroughfares, and featured performances by The Happy Mondays, Tom Jones and Sinéad O'Connor amongst others. This film illustrated his enduring obsessions with Dickensian London and the culture of commerce. While at Goldsmiths Art College in 1970, McLaren had begun another film on Oxford Street, this one a Situationist pop-art musing on the dehumanising effects of commodity capitalism; a theme he would later return to in 2006, as a producer for the film adaptation of *Fast Food Nation*.

In 2006 and 2007 he wrote and presented shows for BBC Radio 2, called *Malcolm McLaren's Musical Map of London* and *Malcolm McLaren's Life and Times in LA*. In

2007 he appeared in the ITV reality show *The Baron* and was scheduled to participate in *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* but pulled out at the last minute. He did, however, participate in *Big Brother: Celebrity Hijack* in 2008, when he encouraged the housemates to take their clothes off, cover themselves in paint and create an artwork using their bodies and a bicycle.

This juxtaposition of high and low was arguably the defining characteristic of McLaren's career. He was, as Savage suggests, a 'combination of huckster and visionary [... one of the few pop theorists (although he'd hate that term) or social motivators to celebrate the tension between art and commerce in pop...' (1997: 150) Creative industries policy discourse may pretend there is no such tension, but McLaren's career demonstrates that an acknowledgement and a grappling with this tension produces the most interesting and creative outcomes. McLaren saw history, not least his own, as a resource to be enjoyed and exploited, raw material for creative fabrication and potential commercial application. As far back as 1983 McLaren saw the possibility of building a vital future from Britain's past, turning imperial tendencies into a thriving, healthy cosmopolitanism, and branding London as a vital, global city:

We tend to borrow from hither and thither, we have a tradition of being the greatest pirates, the greatest plunderers, the best presenters of other people's ideas. If that's the case, then we can use that notion. Then they should engineer the situation of allowing kids to go out and explore other cultures internationally and bring them back to England, to give a whole new feeling towards tourism in England, and pursuing the idea of England being a cultural centre. (in Savage 1997: 154)

That London currently enjoys the status of a creative hub and a hot destination, with a readily identifiable and marketable cultural identity is perhaps due in no small part to McLaren's vision, and his courageous, if sometimes naïve and impractical, attempts to make it a reality.

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